

A sermon for the Parish of the Epiphany, an Episcopal Church in Winchester, Massachusetts, preached by the rector, the Reverend Thomas J. Brown, on Sunday, 6 February 2011, the Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany in lectionary year A.

Jesus says, “You are the salt of the earth.” It’s part of a very, very long sermon, the sermon on the mount. Last week we heard the first and beloved part, the beatitudes. But he keeps preaching and says, “You are the salt” and “you are the light.” The salt of the whole earth and the light of the whole world. He doesn’t say “You ought to be, or you should try to be...” He says, “You are...”

Robert Capon, an Episcopal priest and gourmet cook, once wrote a theological cookbook, *The Supper of the Lamb*, in which he said, Food these days is often identified as the enemy. Butter, salt, sugar, eggs are all out to get you. And yet, at our best, we know better. Butter glorifies everything it touches. Salt is the sovereign perfecter of all flavors. Eggs are, pure and simple, one of the wonders of the world. And if you put them all together, you don’t get sudden death, you get Hollandaise, which in its own way is not less a marvel than the Gothic arch, the computer chip, or a Bach fugue.<sup>1</sup>

I want to tell you the story of two women, each of whom has taught me something about salt, and each of whom is a devout follower of Jesus. The first is a woman named Dorothy, but she goes by Dodo. She’s 92 years old, a fantastic cook, and she is still the matriarch of the parish I served in Vermont. “Force to be reckoned with” might be a better description. She and her late husband emigrated from Germany to the United States in the early 1940s to escape Nazi Germany, and to make a new life. They started out poor as church mice in Newark, New Jersey, which is where they found an Episcopal Church and when they converted to Christianity. Dodo taught me a lot about food, but more than that, she taught me how to be a priest, nearly every day. When it came to cooking it was always in service to others. Good food was meant for good friends, or at least for others in the church. She had all sorts of traditions. A rum cake delivered to your house when your loved one died. A roasted goose on New Year’s Eve. Jams and jellies of every kind made the same morning she picked the fruit. Ordinary boxed oyster crackers were transformed with fresh dill and ground pepper into a magical snack. And, like clockwork, the day you moved into a new house, she’d show up with fresh Challah and a jar of salt, ring the doorbell and say, “You can’t make a home without bread and salt!” and then she’d turn around and drive away, usually without saying good-bye.

The second woman is also a foodie, and considerably younger. Her name is Diana and she goes by Diana. Years ago she worked at the Silver Palate in Manhattan. By the time I knew her she was living in an old barn turned into a gracious home in the hills of southern Vermont, and serving as the chair of the rector search committee. Like Dodo, she loves cooking and she loves Jesus. Next to her stove there’s a salt cellar, she calls it a salt pig; it looks like the sawed off top of a submarine’s periscope, and inside of it is kosher salt. When I met her, ten years ago, I’d never heard of kosher salt. And I’d never seen a salt pig. But I watched as Diana reached her hand into the large open mouth of the crock, took a very generous pinch of the salt, and sprinkled it all over the spinach. Then she said, “never be afraid of salt; it’s the best thing!”

Jesus says we’re the salt of the earth and the light of the world. But what does that mean? What’s a community of Christians like ours supposed to do with this declaration? We can start by doing what he did.

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<sup>1</sup> From the preface, xiii.

He walked on dusty roads and city streets, in his own country, with his own people, with men and women. He loved them and ate and drank with them and laughed and talked late into the night. He asked them to love one another as he loved them. He told stories about a wound man lying beside the road and how the religious leaders walked pompously by on the other side and how a racial minority, a despised other, stopped to help. That's what neighbor love looks like. He told stories about a rebellious son running away from home, but never escaping the gracious reach of his father's love. He welcomed the unwanted and the unclean to his table, and talked about a heavenly banquet with a place for everyone. He healed the sick, touched lepers, gathered children in his arms, fed the hungry, comforted the grieving, and raised the dead. And when he died, victim of the worst thing that can happen to a person, he continued to love, even forgiving his tormentors, until his whole life was poured out.

That's what it looks like. Salt of the earth. Light of the world.

My illustrations of Dodo and Diana aren't meant to underscore their love of food and salt, but rather their ability to live life to its fullest, even when life is hard.

It might well be for you that you need more light in your soul. I bet there's a spice that would bring zeal to counter those urgent demands that seem unending. What do you crave? Whatever it is I want you to know and to savor how much God loves you. Saltiness can be restored! Jesus does this for us, week in and week out, at this Altar and in those healing stations.

Frederick Buechner put it this way:

Where there are dark places, be the light especially there. Be the salt of the earth. Bring out the true flavor of what it is to be alive truly. Be truly alive. Be life-givers to others. That is what Jesus tells tells his church, tells us to be.

The most amazing grace is that when we do that, the world actually becomes a little better. So pass the salt and spread the light.